

Easter Day Sermon
April 8, 2007
The Rev. Peter Swarr

As I began to work on this sermon I was trying to think of a story to illustrate the power of the Resurrection. If the Tigers had gone all the way and won the World Series they would have been a perfect illustration, but let's not talk about what happened last October... Also, I considered using the obvious spring time illustration, warm weather, new life bursting forth, but...the weather doesn't seem all that Easter-y these days... That said, all I could come up with was a story from my college days.

It was my first week of college and I was filled with an undeniable sense of loneliness. I had driven 1000 miles west from Maine, leaving behind friends and family. Added to that, I had just ended a two year relationship with my girlfriend, Angela, citing the impossibility of maintaining a relationship while so far apart. As I sat in my dorm room I was filled with a gnawing doubt, a doubt that I would find friends, a doubt that I would find a place in this land so far removed from the comfortable confines of home and my old friendships. So far I'd gone to all the social mixers that Wheaton had planned, I'd been as extroverted as I could be, trying to get to know my fellow first-year students, hoping that somehow I might find a friend and leave behind my isolation. Yet there I was, sitting in front of my computer, filled with loneliness. And then, I heard a voice, spoken hesitantly yet clearly, at my door, "Peter?" At the sound of my name being spoken I felt relief flood my body. Someone here knew my name. I turned and saw Job standing at the door. He simply said, "Want to go downtown?"

With those words, a new friendship began; with those words, initiated by simply saying my name, a deep fear of being alone was vanquished and new life was born. From that day forward Job and I became fast friends. We traveled through Mexico and Maine together, we roomed together, even now, five years after college, we have gotten together at least once a year in places far and near. I continue to be thankful for that night when Job stopped by my room, called my name, and started our friendship.

Each one of us knows the power of being called by name. It may be the voice of a child, or a parent, or our spouse or significant other, but that voice saying our name brings joy, it brings life. Today we celebrate the miracle of Easter, the miracle of God bringing new life from the very chasm of death, new life in the midst of utter darkness and despair. Today we celebrate the new life of Christ who calls our name, telling us that nothing, not loneliness, not pain, not a bad economy, not fear, not even death can separate us from the life-giving love of God.

Nearly two thousand years ago, early in the morning, a woman named Mary Magdalene walked in the midst of darkness, the darkness of night and the darkness of grief. This darkness was a darkness that she shared with a handful of other people who had followed Jesus, loved Jesus, eaten with Jesus, learned from Jesus, believed in Jesus. In the midst of that darkness Mary walked towards the tomb where the man she called teacher, the man she knew to be the Messiah of God, lay in a cave, his cold Body no longer filled with joy, life, and love. Mary walked, knowing where she was going, knowing she was facing the dark reality of death. And yet, in the midst of that brutal reality, in the midst of her determination to honor the Dead, something totally unexpected occurred. The tomb which contained the Body of her Lord was open, and empty. And Mary ran. She ran as fast as she could to tell the others that Jesus' body was gone. Not only had the Romans killed him in the most humiliating of ways, but now someone had taken his Body, denying him a final anointing, denying Jesus' followers one last chance to see Him.

Upon her return to the tomb with two other disciples Mary wept, wept because Jesus' body was gone, wept because the Hope, Love and Life which had been incarnate in Him, which had made her whole and given her life, had been extinguished by the bitter pain of the Cross. Mary wept, emotions rushing through her, loneliness, fear, and grief mingling into salty tears, tears which all of us know only too well.

And yet, in the midst of Mary's tears, voices sounded forth, asking what must have seemed like an incredibly foolish question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" How could those who asked not understand her tears? Responding to the question she turned around only to find a Gardener in front of her, and He asked her the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And in her grief she could not see, through her tear-filled eyes Mary did not know Who stood in front of her. And then it happened, she *heard* Him, she heard the Voice of Life and Love ring forth calling her by name, calling her to see the new life that stood in front of her, calling us to see the new Life standing in front of us.

On that amazing morning the darkness of grief, the darkness of death, was transformed into incredible, powerful Light, light which vanquished every shadow of grief and sorrow that resided in Mary. On that morning God showed Mary, and God shows us, that the power of Life, the power of the Love of God *has no bounds*. There is nothing, not even death, that could contain and control the love of God. On that morning of new life Mary Magdalene saw with her own eyes the Risen Christ, the One who called her by name, the One who knew her even when she did not know Him. And then Jesus sent her forth to witness to the power of God which she had seen with her own tear stained eyes. And because Mary went forth and told the other disciples, because Mary could not contain the new Life that filled her, we are gathered in this place today hearing the familiar yet incredible, life-transforming story of Jesus' resurrection.

On this joyful morning, we are met by Jesus who calls each of us by name. My friends, if Easter is simply for remembering an incredible event some 2,000 years ago and nothing more, then in the words of Paul "we are of all people [the] most to be pitied." But if the Resurrection *continues* to be real, if Christ *is* indeed alive today, if Easter is about Christ being present not only to Mary *but also to us* then a new dawn has broken upon us. Easter is *not* only about an event long ago in Jerusalem, but it is about resurrection in our own lives.

Resurrection is hope and healing coming forth even in the presence of pain and death in our lives. Resurrection is learning to see Christ in *all* people—friends, strangers, loved ones and even our enemies. Resurrection is the incredible presence of hope in the midst of our grief, joy springing forth in the midst of our sorrow. No matter how deep our grief, be it as deep as the grave, the Resurrection of Christ calls us to see that there is hope for new life, life which will never end. This resurrection shines forth in relationships begun by simply calling someone by name. Like Job spoke to me that evening in Illinois, so does God speak to us now, calling our names.

So my friends, as we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, the fact that God *has* conquered even death, May we be able to listen to how God calls our names, how God has and will continue to bring forth new life in our own lives. The question that confronts us is whether we will have the courage to turn this day, just as Mary did, and to see Jesus even in the midst of our own tears. Do we have the courage to hear Christ calling us by name and filling us with new life? If we hear and see the Lord may we be sent forth from this place with Easter-hope. Hope that new life can and does fill us even in the midst of our broken and bleeding world. And may we know in the deepest recesses of our being that nothing, not even death itself can separate us from the powerful, life-giving love of God made know to us in Jesus Christ.

Amen